The End of Children

Birth rates are crashing around the world. Should we be worried?

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus
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If current trends hold, each generation in Korea will be a third the size of the previous one. Every hundred contemporary Koreans of childbearing age will produce, in total, about twelve grandchildren.

Societies do collapse, sometimes suddenly. Nevertheless, prophets of doom might keep in mind that their darkest predictions have been, on the whole, a little premature. In 1968, Paul Ehrlich, a lepidopterist, and his largely uncredited wife, Anne, published a best-seller called "The Population Bomb." For centuries, economists had worried that the world's food supply could not possibly be expected to keep pace with the growing mobs of people. Now there was no postponing our fate. "The battle to feed all of humanity is over," Ehrlich wrote. "In the 1970s the world will undergo famines—hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death." This was the received wisdom of the era: a decade earlier, an only slightly flippant article in *Science* estimated that in November, 2026, the global population would approach infinity. Ehrlich prescribed a few sane proposals—the legalization of abortion, investments in contraception research, and sex education—but he also floated the idea of spiking the water supply with temporary sterilants. Americans might protest such extreme measures, he allowed, but people in foreign countries should have no choice. It was only reasonable that food aid be conditioned on the developing world's ability to exhibit civilized restraint. Nations that tolerated a free-for-all of unrepentant copulation—he singled out India—would be left to fend for themselves.

"The Population Bomb" transformed regional unease into a global panic. India, in less than two years, subjected millions of citizens to compulsory sterilization. China rolled out a series of initiatives—culminating in the infamous one-child policy—that included punitive fines, obligatory IUD insertions, and unwanted abortions. Ehrlich can hardly be blamed for the most coercive incarnations of population control. He might, however, be accused of impeccable comic timing. By the time "The Population Bomb" was published, the population-growth rate had already peaked. For hundreds of thousands of years, we had gone forth and multiplied. This epoch was coming to an end.

The "total fertility rate" is a coarse estimate of the number of children an average woman will bear. A population will be stable if it reproduces at the "replacement rate," or about 2.1 babies per mother. (The. 1 is the statistical laundering of great personal tragedy.) Anything above that threshold will theoretically generate exponential expansion, and anything below it will

generate exponential decay. In 1960, the tiny country of Singapore had a fertility rate of almost six. By 1985, it had been brought down to 1.6—a rate that threatened to roughly halve its population in two generations. As the economist Nicholas Eberstadt told me, “For two decades, the leaders of Singapore said, ‘Oh, uncontrolled fertility has terribly dangerous consequences, so the rate has to come down,’ and then, after a semicolon, without even catching their breath, said, ‘Wait, I mean go up.’ ” The nation’s leaders launched a promotional campaign: “Have-Three-or-More (if you can afford it).” Singaporeans were known to be good national sports, but, despite the catchiness of the slogan, they proved non-compliant. From one nation to the next, the nightmare of too many descendants turned into the nightmare of too few. In 2007, when Japan’s total fertility rate hit 1.3, a conservative government minister referred to women as “birth-giving machines.” This didn’t go over particularly well with anyone, including his wife.

Today, declining fertility is a near-universal phenomenon. Albania, El Salvador, and Nepal, none of them affluent, are now below replacement levels. Iran’s fertility rate is half of what it was thirty years ago. Headlines about “Europe’s demographic winter” are commonplace. Giorgia Meloni, the Prime Minister of Italy, has said that her country is “destined to disappear.” One Japanese economist runs a conceptual clock that counts down to his country’s final child: the current readout is January 5, 2720.

It will take a few years before we can be sure, but it’s possible that 2023 saw the world as a whole slump beneath the replacement threshold for the first time. There are a couple of places where fertility remains higher—Central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa—but even there the rates are generally diminishing. Paranoia has ensued. In the past year, hundreds of men in the Central African Republic have reported the presumably delusional belief that their genitals have gone missing. In Nigeria, where the fertility rate has fallen from seven to four, a widely read tabloid blamed a conspiracy of perverts in the French intelligence services who had been “using secret nanotechnology innovations to steal penises from African men in order to reverse the extinction of Europeans unwilling to bear children.”

The phenomenon exerts a peculiarly deranging force, and until recently Americans remained oblivious. In the past two decades, however, the American fertility rate has dropped roughly twenty per cent, to 1.6. The right wing sees depopulation as a greater threat than climate change. Elon Musk describes it as “the biggest danger civilization faces by far,” and is trying, in his quiet way, to compensate on his own. He has sired, at least in a technical sense, thirteenish known children, and has reportedly offered the dispensation of his sperm to friends, employees, and people he met once at a dinner party. (Musk denies this. Skeptics of the strategy, though, might recall that Genghis Khan, according to legend, had more than a thousand offspring.) Vice-President J. D. Vance has blamed this “catastrophic problem” on the “childless left.” Liberals more often dismiss the issue, not without reason, as

scaremongering in service of the Republican assault on reproductive rights. Some go further: a dwindling population is a more environmentally sustainable one.

Anyone who offers a confident explanation of the situation is probably wrong. Fertility connects perhaps the most significant decision any individual might make with unanswerable questions about our collective fate, so a theory of fertility is necessarily a theory of everything—gender, money, politics, culture, evolution. Eberstadt told me, “The person who explains it deserves to get a Nobel, not in economics but in literature.”

The global population is projected to grow for about another half century. Then it will contract. This is unprecedented. Almost nothing else can be said with any certainty. Here and there, however, are harbingers of potential futures. South Korea has a fertility rate of 0.7. This is the lowest rate of any nation in the world. It may be the lowest in recorded history. If that trajectory holds, each successive generation will be a third the size of its predecessor. Every hundred contemporary Koreans of childbearing age will produce, in total, about twelve grandchildren. The country is an outlier, but it may not be one for long. As the Korean political analyst John Lee told me, “We are the canary in the coal mine.”

In Seoul, an endless, futuristic sprawl of Samsung- and LG-fabricated high-rises, an imminent shortage of people seems preposterous. The capital city’s metropolitan area, home to twenty-six million citizens, or about half of all South Koreans, is perhaps the most densely settled region in the industrialized world. When I visited, in November, I was advised to withdraw my phone from my pocket on the metro platform, because it would be impossible to do so once on board the train. Fuchsia metro seats are reserved for pregnant women. Those who aren’t yet showing are awarded special medallions as proof of gestation. A looping instructional video reminded passengers of the proper etiquette. Even amid the rush-hour crush, these seats were often left vacant. They seemed to represent less a practical consideration than an act of unanchored faith—like a place for Elijah at a Seder table.

Portents of desolation are everywhere. Middle-aged Koreans remember a time when children were plentiful. In 1970, a million Korean babies were born. An average baby-boomer classroom had seventy or eighty pupils, and schools were forced to divide their students into morning and afternoon shifts. It is as though these people were residents of a different country. In 2023, the number of births was just two hundred and thirty thousand. A baby-formula brand has retooled itself to manufacture muscle-retention smoothies for the elderly. About two hundred day-care facilities have been turned into nursing homes, sometimes with the same directors, the same rubberized play floors, and the same crayons. A rural school has been repurposed as a cat sanctuary. Every Korean has heard that their population will ineluctably approach zero.

Cho Youngtae, a celebrity demographer at Seoul National University, said to me, “Ask people on the street, ‘What is the Korean total fertility rate?’ and they will know!” They often know to two decimal places. They have a celebrity demographer.

Outside of Seoul, children are largely phantom presences. There are a hundred and fifty-seven elementary schools that had no new enrollees scheduled for 2023. That year, the seaside village of Iwon-myeon recorded a single newborn. The entire town was garlanded with banners that congratulated the parents by name “on the birth of their lovely baby angel.” One village in Haenam, a county that encompasses the southern extremity of the Korean peninsula, last registered a birth during the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

Haenam disappears into the sea at a windswept cape called Ttangkkeut, or “End of the World.” Not far away, there is a school that once had more than a thousand elementary-age students. When I visited, in November, it had five. A pastel rainbow brightened the façade, and out front was a statue of a singlet-clad boy with a raised torch; the plinth’s inscription read “Physical strength is national strength.” A pair of slippers had been left for me at the entryway, beside a trophy case crowded with bygone glories and a laminated poster that introduced the names and career aspirations of the three first graders (policeman, architect, idol singer) and the two sixth graders (truck driver, fighter pilot). In a memorable scene in Alfonso Cuarón’s 2006 film, “Children of Men,” a dystopian vision of a sterile world, a deer bounds through a trash-strewn school hallway. Here, dereliction was kept at bay: the corridors were bright, broom-swept, and freshly painted. The former chambers of a departed principal, dusted as if in anticipation of parent conferences, were spectral; the empty room next door had a hulking public-address console, with five microphones set at varying heights. It was as if everyone had evaporated overnight.

The school administrator, Lee Youngmi, efficiently if warily welcomed me into a main office lined with spotless devices—a spiral-binding machine, a laminator—and offered me ginger tea and cookies. When she’d first arrived, ten years ago, there were sixty students. But the surrounding town had since drained away. The large cattle market, which used to be candlelit until well after dark, is gone, as are the brewery, the lumber mill, the police station, and the post office. Parents fought to preserve the school as a center of civic life, but their children now complained that there was no one left to play with. Teachers called the current group of students, in a reference to an old Korean superhero cartoon, the Eagle Five Brothers. Lee was accustomed to solitude. When she left me in the room, she reflexively flicked off the heating.

The sixth-grade teacher, Kang Wooyoung, a man in his twenties, had a similar air of resignation. His two students had been together since they reached school age. When I asked if they got along, he seemed baffled by the question: they fought sometimes, sure, but they didn’t know any other children their

age. “The advantage is that I can be super intimate with the students,” he said. “The disadvantage is that they cannot learn to socialize in a group setting.” One of his sixth graders was disabled; a special-education teacher was retained on his behalf, but the line item was hard to justify. The patterns of the children’s lives were unlikely to be upended by the arrival of a strange new kid or the torment of an unapproachable crush. The school may be closing next year. Kang had loved his first teaching job, his own childhood dream. But he didn’t have any friends in town, either.

The after-school program was about to start. It featured two options: 3-D printing and something Lee called “a new sport.” She could give me no details on the new sport, which was played on Tuesdays. In the past, they had offered volleyball, badminton, and soccer, but such extravagances required a critical mass. She let me wander the school, which felt like a museum of childhood artifacts: an unlit but well-stocked gymnasium, a darkened cafeteria outfitted with a little proscenium stage, enormous forsaken playgrounds, ballfields gone wild. The only apparent concession to the demographic reality was a robotic apparatus for playing Ping-Pong by yourself.

The end of the world is usually dramatized as convulsive and feverish, but population loss is an apocalypse on an installment plan. At one point in “Children of Men,” the protagonist, played by Clive Owen, regards a private archive of cultural treasures—Michelangelo’s “David,” Picasso’s “Guernica”—and turns to its proprietor to say, “A hundred years from now there won’t be one sad fuck to look at any of this. What keeps you going?” The man responds, “I just don’t think about it.”

Hysteria about the number of children is often an alibi for hysteria about who is having them. In the first decades of the Roman Empire, Augustus Caesar grew fixated on the decadent urban élite’s apparent refusal to perpetuate itself. The patrician class, he said, was betraying the country “by rendering her barren”; to deny their ancestors the immortality of their lineage was an act “worse than murder.” In 9 A.D., he legislated that high-status men who remained single by the age of twenty-five would forfeit their inheritances. In addition, the élites were forbidden to marry actors. Their infertility probably owed less to dalliances with thespians than it did to the presence of lead in their utensils, cosmetics, and pipes. Either way, their biological legacies were in fact extinguished: imperial Roman urbanites left little detectable genetic trace in subsequent Europeans. The population as a whole, however, was fine.

Aside from the blips of the Mongol invasions, the Black Death, and the Thirty Years’ War, the human number in Eurasia grew steadily, if slowly, for the bulk of the next two millennia. As the economist Thomas Malthus famously observed, the only effective deterrent to the otherwise consuming “passion between the sexes” was the fear that one’s children would starve to death. Families were just large enough to compensate for the fact that nearly half of

all babies born would never celebrate their fifth birthday. In about 1805, we crossed the threshold of a billion people. That had taken the entirety of human history. Our next billion took just a hundred and twenty-three years.

This population explosion coincided, oddly, with a downward fertility drift in Europe. The pioneers were French aristocrats: in the interest of consolidating familial wealth and prestige, the nobility increasingly delayed marriage, and then sought to limit the number of offspring who might expect their share of an inheritance. This made sense. But the practices diffused, through mimicry, to the lower orders. This made less sense. Evolutionary imperatives, it seemed, could be eclipsed by cultural contagion.

By the twentieth century, more rational explanations had caught up. An industrializing economy no longer required children to help on the farm. Women were free to enter the workplace. At the same time, improvements in medicine and sanitation radically reduced the rate of childhood mortality. Children became capital assets, and investments in their education were understood to beget healthy returns. Economists likened this to other consumer durables: as families get richer, they don't just keep buying cars; they buy nicer ones.

If economic prosperity decreased fertility, it seemed intuitive that lower fertility should, in turn, increase prosperity. During the Cold War, population control came to be seen as a kind of master key—a panacea for social and political ills. In a forthcoming book, "Toxic Demography," the scholar Jennifer Sciubba and her co-authors write that American élites believed "population growth caused poverty, and poverty caused communism." It was in the best interests of the West, leaders such as President Lyndon Johnson affirmed, to subsidize the proliferation of birth control and sex education. It was unfortunate but apparently unavoidable that the principal instrument of family planning was the female body. The president of Planned Parenthood, an organization founded in alignment with the eugenicist sympathies of early-twentieth-century progressive movements, warned that an overly precious concern for "individual women" would impede progress: "We dare not lose sight of our goals—to apply this method to large populations."

South Korea stood at the vanguard. A decade after the Korean War, the country's per-capita G.D.P. was below a hundred dollars—less than that of Haiti. People ate tree bark or boiled grass, and children begged in the streets. After a military coup in 1961, the new authoritarian leadership tied its economic program to the cultivation of a citizenry that was smaller and better educated. It was an all-hands-on-deck approach to the labor force. Social workers fanned out to rural communities, where they encouraged women to have no more than three children. The government legalized contraceptives and pressed for the use of IUDs. These initiatives dovetailed with an emphasis on ethnic homogeneity and traditionalist values. Biracial children of American servicemen, along with the children of unwed mothers, were shipped abroad

for adoption, and Korea became known as the world's largest "exporter" of babies.

The program was regarded as a smashing success. In the span of twenty years, Korea's fertility rate went from six to replacement, a feat described by Asian demographers as "one of the most spectacular and fastest declines ever recorded." A crucial part of this plan was the educational advancement of women, which the same demographers called "unprecedented in the recent history of the world." Far fewer Koreans came into existence, but those who did enjoyed a similarly improbable rise in their standard of living. Parents who remembered hunger produced children who could afford cosmetic surgery.

Fertility all of a sudden seemed like a knob that governments could turn at will. It was simply assumed that the "demographic transition"—the shift from many deaths and many babies to far fewer of both—would settle naturally around the replacement rate. Like a restaurant at capacity, our unconscious maître d's would regulate our numbers on a one-in, one-out basis. It never really occurred to anyone that governments might want to turn the knob the other way.

Except, as a Dutch demographer once dryly put it, "the drive in human populations to procreate may long have been over-estimated." When Korea neared replacement, in 1983, its leadership might have reconsidered its policies. Instead, it doubled down with a new slogan: "Even two are too many." By 1986, the Korean fertility rate reached 1.6. This remained stable for about a decade, then fell off a cliff. The government has now devoted approximately two hundred and fifty billion dollars to various pro-natalist efforts, including cash transfers and parental-leave extensions, to no avail. Two years ago, the legendary feminist legal scholar Joan Williams was shown the most recent Korean fertility data for a documentary. She drew her hands to her face in open-mouthed shock—like Edvard Munch's "Scream"—and the image instantly became a meme.

Korea's demographic collapse is mostly taken as a fait accompli. As John Lee, the political analyst, put it, "They say South Korea will be extinct in a hundred years. Who cares? We'll all be dead by then." The causes routinely cited include the cost of housing and of child care—among the highest in the world. Very little in Korean society seems to give young people the impression that child rearing might be rewarding or delightful. I met a stylish twentysomething news reporter at an airy, silent café in Seoul's lively Itaewon district. "People hate kids here," she told me. "They see kids and say, 'Ugh.' " This ambient resentment finds an outlet in disdain for mothers. She said, "People call moms 'bugs' or 'parasites.' If your kids make a little noise, someone will glare at you." She had recently vacationed in Rome, where adults drank at bars while their kids ran amok. She said, "Here, people would say, 'What the hell are you doing?' "

The online responses to media accounts of the crisis tend to be aggressively cynical: “Just wait, we can go lower than that,” or “You can’t just birth the slaves.” The reporter said, “When I write about this, I think, Well, what would change *my* mind? The answer is nothing. It’s the norm not to want kids.” Like many Koreans, she dotes on her dog. Finding gifts in Seoul for my two little soccer fanatics at home required deliberate planning—I schlepped all over town looking for national-team jerseys in child’s sizes and had to settle for black-market knockoffs—but there is a pet depot on practically every block. Last year, strollers for dogs outsold those for babies. She said, “I’m not saying people value dogs more than they value children.” She paused to gesture to the other patrons: “But all you have to do is look around.”

American conservatives have become preoccupied with foreshadowings of “civilizational suicide.” A year ago, the *Times* columnist Ross Douthat, a father of five, published an opinion piece that invoked the Korean example as a “warning about what’s possible for us.” America’s birth rate started to slip in 2008, with the onset of the financial crisis; by 2022, the U.S. had caught up, or perhaps caught down, with the Korea of the nineteen-eighties. Douthat and others see worrisome parallels here: marriage rates are in retreat; gender polarization is rising; young people aren’t even having sex for fun, let alone productively; the meritocracy is a grind; we’re all rotting in front of our phones. Douthat has been circumspect about the issue in a way that MAGA Republicans are not. The Trump Administration’s new Transportation Secretary has already instructed his department to prioritize “communities with marriage and birth rates higher than the national average.” As the young right-wing activist Charlie Kirk put it last summer, “The childless are the ones that are destroying the country.”

A childless vacuum, by this account, is the future liberals want. Kirk’s conservative compatriots point to such examples as the young progressive activist David Hogg, who once tweeted that he would “much rather own a Porsche and have a Portuguese water dog and golden doodle” than have children. “Long term it’s cheaper, better for the environment and will never tell you that it hates you or ask you to pay for college.” These liberal caricatures perceive family commitments as a drag on “self-actualization,” which often becomes an excuse for hedonism. Conservatives instead call for a rehabilitation of family values. The “trad wives” of social media make cornflakes from scratch and would never let their husbands milk the cows. As the self-described “domestic extremist” Peachy Keenan has put it, “The home with the mom and dad is the little factory to produce the future, like, literally.” Others have reached for more nefarious explanations for languishing birth rates. Tucker Carlson made a documentary about “collapsing testosterone levels” in America; a far-right influencer known as Raw Egg Nationalist blames endocrine disruptors in perfume. There is no evidence, however, that

the epidemic is one of infecundity. It may be wishful to think so: it's easier to avoid leaden dishware than it is to reinvigorate a society's desire for children.

The narrative of moral decay also sits uneasily with the underlying data. In 2011, forty-five per cent of American pregnancies were unplanned. This has come down dramatically, in large part owing to an astonishing reduction in the incidence of teen-age pregnancy. Fresh-faced "trad" milkmaids, for their part, do not seem to have more children. Where female professional ambition once tracked with smaller families, this is no longer the case: in Tunisia and in southern India, where women make up a very small fraction of the labor market, fertility has dropped below replacement. Recent research indicates that fertility rates now trend higher in countries where more women work. In America, the decline cuts across demographic groups. Even Mormons are barely replacing themselves.

Carlson has accused liberals of a plan to replace native-born Americans with immigrants. Even if this were true, it might not be the most provident strategy. Studies have shown that newcomers from high-fertility countries tend to adopt the reproductive customs of their host nation within a generation. Hispanic women account for a large share of America's recent fertility decline. Only two communities appear to be maintaining very high fertility: ultra-Orthodox Jews and some Anabaptist sects. The economist Robin Hanson's back-of-the-envelope calculations suggest that twenty-third-century America will be dominated by three hundred million Amish people. The likeliest version of the Great Replacement will see a countryside dotted everywhere with handsome barns.

Fertility decline is a polarizing issue in Korea. Lee Jun-seok, a thirty-nine-year-old Harvard graduate who is sometimes compared to J. D. Vance, is the most popular conservative politician of his generation. We met late one Friday evening for beer and *soju*, and our conversation was interrupted every five minutes by drunk revellers who bowed deeply to him and took selfies. In the 2022 Korean Presidential race, Lee helped mobilize disaffected young men to turn out in support of the conservative candidate, who promised to abolish the gender ministry, which coördinates the country's equity policies. His victory, in what some observers called the "incel election," prefigured Trump's triumph last year. Lee told me, "When many women get to thirty-five, they start bitching about being duped by the feminists who told them they could have it all. It's literally impossible for them to meet someone with the same socioeconomic status at that point, so they have to degrade themselves. Now half of us are unmarried, and I'm part of that." When I asked about his American analogue, he said, "J. D. Vance should not have been talking in a way that stereotyped people." He paused, then continued, "Although in Korea there's more of a reality of childless cat ladies."

If Koreans aren't reproducing, it's not for lack of traditionalism. Their culture, as one pro-natalist told me, is already "based." Pornography and sex work are

illegal, and abortion was decriminalized only a few years ago. A negligible proportion of Korean babies are born out of wedlock. Korean men don't do much at home, and those who do are often branded "*pongpongnam*," a reference to dish soap that means "foamy man." Paternity leave remains relatively rare, and men who take it are called "latte papas," as if they're using the leave as a vacation. Women fear they are assigned low-level professional tasks in anticipation of their departure from the labor force. As Kim Jeongmin, the editorial director of the news organization Korea Pro, told me, "In H.R. interviews, women feel pressured to show that they're so dedicated to their careers that they have no plans to get married."

The insinuation that women are at fault for the demographic crisis has turned gender friction into gender war. In 2016, the Korean government issued a "birth map," in which, as one blogger put it, "They counted fertile women like they counted the number of livestock." A conservative member of the National Assembly recruited his own chorus line to demonstrate a novel dance move he thought might help strengthen women's pelvic floors. Many young women now flirt with the "4B" mentality, a term for those who eschew dating, sex, marriage, and children; some even forgo friendships with men. Yeho, a nineteen-year-old sophomore at a prominent women's college in Seoul, described the routine misogyny of her male classmates in high school: boys habitually recited lines they'd heard in porn, or illegally circulated pornographic memes.

She had no interest in dating or children. She told me, "They might not grow up well, or they might fall into an incel community—and, besides, children aren't a necessary part of the good life." Women in her mother's generation often regretted the sacrifices they had been expected to make, and they raised their daughters to prioritize their careers. Yeho's college has an anonymous Reddit-like forum. The basic ground rule, she said, was that "to give space to feeling good about men and relationships is to ignore or minimize the dark side. Posts about heterosexual romance require a trigger warning!" The most common such advisory is a derogatory portmanteau of the words "love" and "hate." In one typical reply, a woman wrote, "Can you please stop posting about dating, it's secondhand embarrassment? Your dick-to-ride-on is not special at all, seriously."

Iasked around in Seoul about where I might encounter children in the wild, and was directed to Daechi-dong, an affluent neighborhood notorious for its gated high-rise fortresses, luxury S.U.V.s, and after-school academies, or *hagwons*. These institutions have names such as Groton, Swaton International, and Emilton Academy, and each has its own faux heraldry. The most privileged students spend their afternoons, evenings, and weekends at as many as a dozen different *hagwons*. Eighty per cent of Korean families purchase private education; poor families tend to spend as much

on *hagwons* as on groceries. Aggregate spending on educational enrichment exceeds the R. & D. expenditures of Samsung, a conglomerate that makes up a fifth of the entire Korean economy. At school dismissal, students climb into yellow buses that ferry them from one *hagwon* to the next. Through the plate-glass window of a building stacked with *hagwons*, I could see an orderly queue of elementary schoolers—so colorful, so small—awaiting their turn in the elevator.

Koreans cite the pressures and costs of excessive education as a large part of their reluctance to have children. (American parents in liberal enclaves might share a version of these misgivings.) An auspicious Korean childhood culminates in acceptance to one of Seoul's three most prestigious universities. Admission is primarily based on a student's performance on the national collegiate entrance exam, or Suneung, which is administered every year on a Thursday in November. The opening of the stock market is delayed that day, and many construction sites are closed. Bus and metro services are increased to ease traffic congestion. Students running late may avail themselves of a police-motorcycle escort. During the English-comprehension section, which requires absolute silence, air-traffic control suspends all takeoffs and landings.

At some *hagwons*, fifth graders learn calculus. Elementary students take pre-med courses. Some focus on sports or musical instruments. There's a Korean saying that "a dragon emerges from a small stream"—that talent can be identified and nurtured in any backwater. But the political analyst John Lee, who was once a *hagwon* instructor, was dubious about this meritocratic ideal: "I was given a score range for students. If I gave a score that was too high, the parents would think that their children should be at a 'better' *hagwon*. If I gave a score that was too low, the parents would think, This is wasting my money, it's not working." Some *hagwons* are extremely selective. As one young woman said, "If you don't go to a certain one, you're not part of the group." Historically, at the strictest cram schools, social interactions were carefully circumscribed. Some forbade any conversation between boys and girls that were not directly related to study. Hugging, or the exchange of romantic notes, might have resulted in bathroom-cleaning duty.

Four out of five children in Korea today describe school as a "battlefield." In 2012, the advocacy group World Without Worries About Private Education helped develop an ad campaign that showed a baby bottle full of fried rice, with a caption that read, "Mom! It's too early for me." Curfew laws prohibit *hagwon* classes after about 10 or 11 p.m. The issue nonetheless remains a society-wide prisoner's dilemma, and even those who strenuously object in principle frequently relent in practice. When I visited the advocacy group, one employee told me, "In the macro, everyone understands it's a problem, but in the micro, for *my* family, and *my* kids, I have to do it." When I commented that the children must be miserable, he corrected me: "If you don't send them, the kids feel bad! That's the only place they can see their

friends, because no one is at the playground.” The leading cause of death among young Koreans is suicide. More than one Korean described their culture to me as “broken.”

It is not easy to opt out of the system. One morning, I met with half a dozen members of an unorthodox day-care collective in a neighborhood called Hapjeong. This patch of Seoul, they told me, was distinctive for its lack of chain stores, and they convened at an otherwise empty local bakery; it was next to a Starbucks, across the street from two other Starbucks, and catty-corner from a fourth Starbucks. Forty years ago, Seoul had practically no child care. Some working parents locked their children in their apartments and hoped for the best. Children died in house fires. In 2002, a group of grassroots organizers formed this communal alternative.

The current parents were nostalgic for their own alleyway childhoods. An artist named Daum told me that, when he was young, “if you kicked a ball into someone else’s property, you went and rang the doorbell and got it back.” That city no longer existed: “Now you get yelled at—‘You could’ve broken my window!’ ” There’s a special word for noise between floors. Complaints forced Daum and his wife, Dani, to leave their previous building; one neighbor said, “I can’t stand your children anymore!”

The day care took the kids outside every day. They learned about plants and animals, and were taught to mark the seasons with the old festival days. The use of standard honorifics was discouraged, and children spoke to teachers in “half speak,” the register ordinarily reserved for informal address. The parents agreed not to send their children to *hagwons* for the time being. This ethic of mutual care had made parenting “less scary,” one mother remarked. Still, when their children aged out, they would be fed to the educational machine. Another mother said, “When they get to normal elementary school, the other little kids are already accustomed to a full-day schedule—they have more stamina, they’re used to *hagwons*—but these kids are still used to nap time.”

Hwang Ock-kyeung, the president of a government-sponsored think tank, told me that changes in policy can’t mend a culture that marginalizes children. “My own employees tell me their babies look alien to them,” she said. “Young people want the government to increase the child-care hours, but then the time people spend with their children decreases!” An obsession with social status turns children into tokens of parental achievement: “Many parents take the subsidies and spend more money on extra *hagwons*, and that becomes a vicious cycle.” Enhanced professional productivity for parents, and the ability to enjoy one’s free time, were not just collateral benefits. She added, “There’s a reason that if you go to Daechi-dong you’ll see *hagwons* and Pilates in the same building.”

Just before Christmas, when a viral tweet announced a record low for American fertility, some liberals blew confetti. One young woman was retweeted twenty-six thousand times for writing, “Amazing keep it up everybody!!!!!!” A comedian urged her followers to “HOLD THE LINE!!!!!” Last year, the philosopher Anastasia Berg and the editor Rachel Wiseman, who seem otherwise unimpeachably progressive, published a book called “What Are Children For?” It builds to a thoughtful, nuanced, heavily qualified endorsement of childbearing as kinda nice. In a scathing review, the writer Moira Donegan observed that ambivalent American women do not lack for such counsel. Any leftist who feels the need to emphasize that babies are good, Donegan argues, might not be a leftist after all: “It may be that on some level, perhaps not always a conscious one, the millennial pro-natalists are trying to convince American women that the freedom they lost with Roe v. Wade was not worth having.”

Given the stakes for reproductive autonomy, Donegan’s reservations are entirely comprehensible. Most left-leaning Americans are similarly distrustful of the pro-natalist discourse. Leigh Senderowicz, a feminist demographer at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, told me, “There is fundamentally no way to do this that doesn’t end up treating women’s bodies as a tool.” According to the U.N., countries with pro-natalist policies tend to be less democratic. A baby-bonus initiative in Italy’s Piedmont region was given a name and logo that seemed an awful lot like an homage to Fascism. Eberstadt, the economist, told me, “In China, the mechanics are in place to say, ‘Oh, I’m sorry, Miss Wong, you can’t fly on airplanes anymore, because you’re unmarried.’ ” Local Party officials are already knocking on doors to track menstrual cycles. The Russian government recently passed a law that criminalizes “child-free propaganda,” potentially including the representation of a happily childless couple on television or social media.

Some progressives seem fine with child-free propaganda. The BirthStrike Movement proclaims that “not having children is the single most impactful decision that a person can make to reverse climate change.” This might seem sensible, but depopulation will happen far too slowly to alleviate the worst effects of climate change. The children who would have traded their own existence for a cooler planet have already been born. In “What Are Children For?,” Berg and Wiseman suggest that such environmental logic provides a cloak of moral legitimacy for personal preferences that feel otherwise difficult to articulate. One scholar called this the “socio-political weaponization of fertility.”

Liberals are right to point to immigration as the obvious way to mitigate the economic effects of demographic contraction. Italy currently has a shortage of nurses, and Germany has a shortage of plumbers; a baby born today does nothing to unclog a Düsseldorf sink. Even immigration, however, is a stopgap measure: by 2100, ninety-seven per cent of the world’s countries are predicted to be below replacement. In the meantime, pro-immigration policies

will continue to generate nativist backlashes. Last year, Seoul sponsored a pilot program to import a hundred nannies from the Philippines. The project, despite its lack of ambition, was wildly controversial. This was perhaps unsurprising: Korean women have been known to berate their Vietnamese daughters-in-law for peeling apples in the wrong direction. American liberals are quick to associate the fear of cultural corrosion with xenophobia. But Korea was long a vassal state of China, and then a Japanese colony, so the question of civilizational survival has a slightly different valence there than it does here. And even liberals tend to get understandably sentimental about, say, the loss of linguistic diversity. The Finnish demographer Anna Rotkirch pointed out to me that fewer than ten thousand babies were born in Estonia last year. “What will happen to the Estonian language?” she asked. “Seriously, this is not a far-off thing!”

The most sophisticated liberal arguments interpret fertility decline as a symptom of more serious underlying problems—economic precarity and an “incomplete” gender revolution. Men and women alike struggle to provide for their families, but the participation of fathers at home has not caught up to the participation of mothers at work. A more generous welfare state, and a more equitable culture, should therefore produce more children. This does not seem to be the case. Finland famously provides all new parents with “baby boxes” full of useful, high-quality products, and Sweden has normalized extended parental leave, especially for fathers, and flexible work hours. The Nordic countries are wonderful places to be parents, but their fertility rates are lower than our own. These trends are not reducible to budgetary concerns. Child care is virtually free in Vienna and extremely expensive in Zurich, but the Austrians and the Swiss have the same fertility rate.

The incidence of childlessness among Democrats is significantly higher than it is among Republicans. This appears in part to be an artifact of educational polarization. Lower fertility rates seem correlated with the perception that proper child development depends upon enormous amounts of personal attention. Some economists attribute our recent fertility slide to a generational shift: people who were born in the nineties are less likely to remember a time when children were largely left alone. Working mothers today devote more time to active child care than stay-at-home mothers did in previous generations. Mothers with a college degree spend about four more hours per week with their children than mothers without one, and they are also less likely to live in proximity to extended family. In an economy biased in favor of highly skilled employees, a protracted education followed by a long career apprenticeship seems like the only way to secure a dependable income. But the longer people wait to try to form a family, the less likely they are to have one.

We all might agree that everyone deserves the financial security to afford the number of children they desire. The word “afford,” however, means different things to different people, and in the coastal precincts of “achievement

culture” it has been inflated to encompass individual bedrooms, piano lessons, travel lacrosse teams, Russian math, and single-origin organic peanut butter.

For most of human history, having children was something the majority of people simply did without thinking too much about it. Now it is one competing alternative among many. The only overarching explanation for the global fertility decline is that once childbearing is no longer seen as something special—as an obligation to God, to one’s ancestors, or to the future—people will do less of it. It is misogynistic to equate reproductive autonomy with self-indulgence, and child-free people often devote themselves to loving, conscientious caretaking. At the same time, we should be able to acknowledge that there is something slightly discomforting about a world view that weighs children against expensive dinners or vacations to Venice—as matters of mere preference in a logic of consumption.

In the southern city of Gangjin, I stopped at a coffee shop and encountered a sign on the entrance that read “This is a no-kids zone. The child is not at fault. The problem is the parents who do not take care of the child.” The doors of Korean establishments are frequently emblazoned with such prohibitions. The only children I saw on Seoul’s public transit were foreigners. Kim Kyu-jin, who is by all accounts part of Korea’s first openly lesbian couple with a child, told me, “Five years ago, we didn’t think too deeply about ‘no-kids zones.’ Now we think it’s discriminatory. We always call places beforehand to ask if we can bring our daughter.” Children remain welcome and visible at malls. The Seoul government offers a “Multi-Child Happiness Card,” which gives parents discounts at select amusement parks and theatres. When it was first introduced, you needed three kids to qualify; now you qualify with two. Daum, the artist, told me, “We joke that soon enough they’re going to give the ‘multiple-kids card’ to households with only one.”

It is a poignant irony that among Korea’s few child-friendly places are former schools. In a picturesque river valley outside the northern city of Chuncheon, an old elementary school has been converted into a café and resort that resembles a high-end sanatorium, with blond wood and poured concrete. Alongside nostalgic references to the “innocent smiles of children long ago,” its brochure offers a family photo-shoot package; the price includes basic retouching, although they promise not to “go overboard.” For families who can’t afford premium coffees, the Seoul government has repurposed a collection of rural schools as family campgrounds.

One lies in the mountains not far from the D.M.Z.; I visited at the tail end of foliage season. An uneven parking lot had been outfitted with a matrix of black tents erected atop low wooden platforms. The old cafeteria featured a few game tables. A pink-sweatsuited adolescent played a desultory Ping-Pong match against his uncle. The boy’s father told me, “We come here with our children so we won’t be bothered by other people’s judgment.” Outside, dry

brown leaves blew around in a light rain, and most of the families huddled under awnings that had been installed to protect the tents. One solitary little girl played with a bright bird-shaped kite attached to a plastic fishing pole. As I left, I noticed a statue of a boy with a torch, identical to the one I'd seen at the school in Haenem, but considerably the worse for wear.

Countries have tried everything to reverse demographic collapse. In Hungary, women with four or more children gain a lifetime exemption from income tax. In Georgia, the Orthodox Patriarch offered to personally baptize any baby born to the parents of more than two children. Although some nations have stabilized at a low level, there is not a single modern example of one that has managed a sustained recovery from very low fertility to replacement. The world's most lavishly pro-natalist governments spend a fortune on incentives and services, and have increased the fertility rate by approximately a fifth of a baby per woman. Some observers believe that subsidies could succeed, but they would have to be on the order of three hundred thousand dollars per child.

One smoggy morning, I visited Oh Se-hoon, the mayor of Seoul, at his City Hall office, which recalled the captain's deck in a space opera. He has focussed primarily on the dire shortage of housing in Seoul, a city where almost fifty per cent of people now live alone. He listed his other initiatives: the Childbirth Encouragement Project, which included "eighty-seven subprojects," and the Mom and Dad Happiness Project, which comprised "twenty-eight subprojects." While the Mayor lectured me, a large screen on the far wall ticked through an optimistic slide show of inverted pyramids and other fanciful renderings of urban futurism. When I mentioned that some demographers now regard population decline as a phenomenon to be managed rather than remediated, he intimated that voters were an obstacle to more profound adjustments. On my way out, two of his aides directed my attention to a lobby café where espresso drinks were prepared by a robotic barista arm.

Some Korean companies pay their employees to have children, but the private sector now generally accepts that it must adapt to a world where children are luxuries. Analysts anticipate a hundred-and-sixty-billion-dollar "silver industry" to meet the needs of healthy pensioners. One travel agency expects that seniors, in the absence of grandchildren to spoil, will spend their disposable income on pricier trips. Conglomerates like Hyundai are planning high-end retirement communities for those who cannot rely on their families for eldercare. Companies that once catered to the mass market will have to pivot to a premium clientele. Samsung has long relied on wedding registries for the sales of large appliances. Cho, the celebrity demographer, praised a recent company plan to sell a few really fancy refrigerators in place of many adequate ones. The new line is called Samsung Bespoke.

The United States is nowhere near the point of robotic baristas. The current "crisis" might well go the way of the population bomb. The sociologist Philip N. Cohen told me, "If you think you have a model now that predicts birth rates in two hundred years, you're just drawing lines on a chart." Most scholars deem our nascent panic to be counterproductive; in the reassuringly titled "Decline and Prosper!," from 2022, the Norwegian demographer Vegard Skirbekk reiterates that "low, but not too low," fertility is a good thing. There is, however, an asterisk attached to this. Two decades ago, Skirbekk helped contrive a thought experiment called "the low-fertility trap hypothesis," which proposed the possibility of an unrecoverable downward spiral. Ultra-low fertility meant far fewer babies, which meant far fewer people to have babies, or even to *know* babies; this feedback loop could even shift cultural norms so far that childlessness would become the default option.

This eventuality had seemed remote. Then it more or less happened in Korea. When I asked Skirbekk if other countries might follow suit, he replied, "Quite a few, possibly." Rotkirch, the Finnish demographer, underscored the notion that reproductive cues are social. "In a forthcoming survey, I want to ask, 'Have you ever had a baby in your arms?' " she told me. "I think in Finland it's a sizable portion that hasn't." These mimetic dynamics play out not just within countries but between them. Hwang Sun-jae, a sociologist who studies fertility norms, traces the swift dissemination of low fertility in part to social media's role as an accelerant of global monoculture. It has never been easier to acquaint yourself with the opportunity costs of childbearing—the glamorous destinations unvisited, the faddish foods uneaten. "People once had only local comparisons," he said. "Now they see other people's lives—in New York City and England and France—and they have a sense of relative deprivation: my life is not good enough."

The costs of an aging and diminished society feel more abstract. Last year, an online sketch portrayed a traditional Korean first-birthday celebration in ten years' time: the World Cup stadium hosts the festivities for a crowd of ten thousand, including the country's President. Regular life, in the video, is peppered with minor inconveniences: food orders can take more than ninety minutes. The actual inconveniences might not be as minor. By 2050, Korea's labor force will be about two-thirds of its current size, and food delivery might be a thing of the past. Cho advised the Nongshim noodle company that it would soon be impossible to hire anyone in Busan, Korea's second-largest city.

Retirement ages will continue to increase. Autocratic countries, where politicians can ignore older voters, might simply deny pensions to the childless. New forms of factionalism could test the limits of liberal coexistence. Younger workers in social democracies might increasingly resent the taxes they pay for entitlement programs that they will never themselves receive. Men, especially those of low status, are currently much less likely to have the number of children they desire, if they have children at all. If this trend continues, every election will be an incel election. In "The Children of

Men,” not the film but the original novel, by P. D. James, the social order cannot withstand such a void. Great Britain is an island of twilit senility overseen by a strict Warden. Basic infrastructure is shored up by an immigrant underclass, and the elderly are chained to barges that disappear beneath the sea. (A few years ago, Yusuke Narita, a Japanese economist at Yale, called upon Japanese seniors to perform seppuku.)

Many Koreans told me that they look forward to a society with less competition—a smaller, gentler world with a greater share of resources for all. In this picture, the future is exactly the same as the present, except with fewer people. It is just as probable, however, that inequality will increase. As universities close en masse, the remainder might prove even more selective. If Korea’s labor force becomes insufficient to produce and distribute basic goods—a distinct possibility by the end of the century—they could be hoarded by those of means. The demographer Dean Spears noted that the more idiosyncratic our needs and desires the more we rely on the fact that other people share them: “If you need specialized medical care, you’re less likely to find it in a rural place than in a big city, where there are more people who need the same sort of thing you need.” If current trends continue, in several decades there will be many fewer Koreans, and virtually all of them will live in metropolitan Seoul—a city-state surrounded by wilderness, ruin, and, if they are lucky, robotic rice cultivation.

Economic prosperity has long relied on an expanding population to drive greater output, increased demand, and new markets. Advocates of degrowth have pointed out the manifest unsustainability of such intergenerational pyramid schemes, but their implosion will probably not be peaceful. If the bottom falls out of, say, the Chinese real-estate market—among the largest asset classes in the world—the entire global economy could totter. Iroquois “mourning wars” against neighboring tribes—raids to replenish their own numbers with captives—intensified in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, after disease and colonial violence depleted the nation. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine seems to have been motivated in part by Vladimir Putin’s desire to increase the motherland’s quantity of ethnic Russians.

In a grotesque way, the “Mad Max” scenario represents a comforting fantasy. A steampunk world—with war-making vehicles lashed together from old radiators and Atari circuit boards—is at least a vital one. But a depopulated landscape might actually be characterized by quiescence. There is an extensive literature that links economic dynamism to youth. Young people, who have wilder imaginations and a greater appetite for risk, drive the bulk of entrepreneurial activity. For Elon Musk and his followers, children are technological lottery tickets: we never know which genetically enhanced baby might at last invent a functional warp drive. One technological pro-natalist told me, “We do not exist just to consume, and we don’t want the end state of humanity to be the Villages in Florida.”

The most persuasive aspect of technological pro-natalism is not what we might theoretically gain from a larger population. It is the foreboding of what we might lose with a diminished one. The evolutionary anthropologist Joseph Henrich has summoned the example of the aboriginal Tasmanians, who were cut off from mainland Australia about ten thousand years ago. Their population was too small and too diffuse to preserve their expertise, and they apparently forgot how to make complex bone tools, how to make warm clothing, and even how to fish. And sheer numbers are only part of the story. For a culture to evolve, it needs a lot of different kinds of people—stubborn, nutty people with outlandish proposals. The weirdest people around are almost always children.

Demographers often worry that indulging in sci-fi speculation might inadvertently prompt governments to adopt draconian measures. Still, the demographer Leslie Root admitted that she sometimes wonders, “Is it possible we actually evolved to be too smart for our own good, and we’re just too interested in other things to go along with the bullshit of having to have enough kids to perpetuate the species? I don’t know! Maybe?” She collected herself, then added, “What’s most interesting to me, when I think about what it might be like to maintain a stable human population, is that there’s a very real possibility that we’ll need to reinvent society.”

A decade ago, a Korean reality program showcased wealthy celebrities in unattainably idyllic scenes with their children. A more realistic portrayal of family life might have been more fruitful. Miji and Ho-gil are a shy, attractive, and slightly unusual couple, the parents of two boys. Miji, who is thirty-three, studied media in Seoul, and then freelanced for a broadcaster in Gwangju. Ho-gil, who is thirty-eight, got a job after college at a children’s foundation, where the “strict milestones” that govern Korean aspirations lost their hold on him. He recently saw a report that Korea was the only wealthy industrialized nation where the highest personal priority was economic improvement rather than love. He told me, “In Korean society, we are educated to have one single goal, but then, once you’re grown up, you don’t know what to do with your freedom—you get lost in the world, and you don’t know how to have a good life.”

They met at a book club in 2016. Miji matter-of-factly characterized herself as “the kind of person who is always swayed by other people’s opinions,” and she was drawn to Ho-gil for his independence. After five years of living separately, they decided to get married. She wanted a large, formal wedding, but he imagined something more intimate, and they compromised. Miji told me, “I can’t ignore social norms, but I have to strike a balance between what society wants and his beliefs.”

She hoped to have children, but at the time he felt “selfish”—he wasn’t used to being around kids and wasn’t sure what to do with them. He read some books about children, and they had a “very intense debate and discussion.” She had

no job security, and he told her, “If you’re serious about this, change your job fast.” She found a position as a museum curator. Ho-gil told me that he “isn’t interested in moving up the ladder,” so he wasn’t worried that he’d be penalized for taking time off. But Miji seemed more ambivalent: “If you have career ambitions, it’s really hard to make the decision to go on leave for children.” (She noted that she has been passed over twice for a promotion.) At the time, Gwangju offered a monthly payment to parents of about a hundred and fifty dollars, on top of a five-hundred-dollar subsidy that the federal government paid each month until the child went to day care. For Ho-gil, the money made the prospect thinkable. “All his decisions were down to the numbers, and the numbers worked out,” Miji said.

Their first child, Wooju, was born in 2022. When they brought him home from the hospital, the first thing they did was apologize to their neighbors, warning them that they “might move around and make noise.” Fortunately, the elderly couple downstairs was “more forgiving than most.” Miji and Ho-gil were very happy. It was easy to imagine having a second.

Regional birth subsidies sometimes succeed on paper, but these statistics are artificially inflated by “take and dash” parents, who move to a place temporarily for the money—as if the entire country were playing a bizarro version of musical chairs. In 2023, Gwangju curtailed the subsidies. But, just as Miji became pregnant again, Gangjin, a small city about an hour and a half away, announced an offer three times as generous. As it happened, Ho-gil’s parents worked a farm there. Much of what Miji knew about the area was gleaned from a reality-television show about the renovation of ghost-town houses; her friends found the prospect of their moving to Gangjin inexplicable, even shameful. Still, this past October, the family relocated.

On a weekday morning, they had me over to their tidy, spare apartment. One of the only adornments on the walls was a long-defunct video-intercom console, its molded curves like a “Star Trek” fossil. The meagre trappings seemed like a defiant statement of their priorities, and the home was warmed by their togetherness. Their younger son, ten-month-old Eun-byul, was a round child dressed in a green bib that made him look like a little flower. He had only just begun to say “Mommy.” They were impressed by how dissimilar the two boys were—the older one sensitive and introverted, the little one active and outgoing. Their lives are largely isolated. They’re grateful for the region’s rural beauty, but the closest pediatrician is about a twenty-minute drive away. Miji said, “If your baby isn’t healthy, you can’t live here.”

They had noticed one neighbor with a baby, and they were hoping that at some point they’d say more than “hello.” They have otherwise resigned themselves to the fact that they’ll have few opportunities to meet other parents until school begins, when they’ll join a parent group chat for logistics. The town features three places they can take the kids, including an indoor playground run by the local district office. They showed me photos of Eun-byul

in a little sandbox on a linoleum floor. The town's one "trendy Instagrammable café," as Miji put it, has declared itself a no-kids zone.

They seemed pleased for the chance to discuss the banalities of rural family life. Miji's friends weren't interested in hearing about it. They told her, "Once the children are older, you'll come back to Gwangju for their education." She'd attended a *hagwon* to prepare for the college entrance exam, and she wasn't inclined to deny her children the same advantage. Ho-gil had not, and he didn't think it was necessary. In fact, he wasn't convinced that a college degree was essential, which to most Koreans is as radical as saying that he didn't need hot water.

When they do return to their jobs, they will both face an hour-and-a-half-long commute each direction. They consider that a concern for another day. Ho-gil picked up Eun-byul, who bounced on his lap with a contented sigh. He said, "Of course I have doubts, and I wonder what my life would have been like if I hadn't chosen to have a family." But he'd been wrong to assume, as his friends did, that "fatherhood eats away at your personal life." Still, my (male, unmarried, dog-owning) interpreter, who told me later that such affectionate behavior was uncommon among Korean fathers, couldn't help but ask him, "Aren't you bored?"

There's a philosophical view, best associated with the scholar L. A. Paul, that the decision to have children is fundamentally irrational. A rigorous cost-benefit analysis might produce an estimate of a child's expected value, but the experience is transformative in a way that renders the calculation irrelevant. You will have made a decision by the lights of a person you will no longer be. There's something inescapably patronizing when parents make this argument. I remain unsure if it's true, yet I've heard myself repeat it. For the usual reasons of work-life intractability, writing this piece has taken me away from my own little boys. When I asked my eight-year-old why someone should have children, he stopped punching his little brother long enough to say, "We're excellent company."

The leap-of-faith argument makes sense only if we, and the society we live in, remain open to such transformation. In Korea, one graduate student told me, "The standard life course is boring. Surprises are not virtues. We can imagine all of the things until we die." Before the Asian financial crisis, in 1997, the economist Kim Seongeun told me, the top scorers on the collegiate entrance exam often went on to Seoul National University to study physics. When a faltering economy prompted large companies to fire their scientists, he observed, many parents converged on the idea that medicine was a safer path. It didn't take long for the top scorers to become doctors instead. Kim wasn't exempt from the tendency to hedge his bets: "How can I place my own son in a small boat?" To become a parent at all, I remarked offhandedly, was to perceive all boats as too small. He laughed and thought for a moment, then

said, “Maybe the low fertility rate here is because people are smart. The risk-free asset in a diversified portfolio is zero kid.” He just wasn’t sure what to make of it all in the end. He said, “The low fertility rate is not really good or bad. We just don’t know.”

This is the intellectually responsible position. Emotionally, it’s a little evasive. Rotkirch, the Finnish demographer, recalled a newspaper item in which a young woman asked why she should sacrifice her body and her partnership for a pregnancy. Such anxieties are a natural prelude to any vault into the unknown. Still, Rotkirch marvelled, “My idea was that it just happens and it’s normal to be nervous.” Chang Pilwha, who has been an influential women’s-studies scholar for forty years, echoed this bewilderment. “Many of my best feminist friends say the best thing they’ve ever done is have a child, and nobody should brand that as conservative or liberal,” she said. She is apprehensive about what society will look like once fewer and fewer people are parents. As she put it, “Becoming a mother or a father is a precious process of learning to be human, and the lack of that experience with vulnerability is only going to create more ruthlessness.”

Child rearing is not a necessary condition for vulnerability. It’s not even a sufficient one. But there may nevertheless be something irreducible about the shared experience of parenthood—a life in which your fragile heart now seems to beat on the outside of your body. You see the guardians of a sleeping child on the subway and think, These are not just random strangers but fellow-passengers with utterly exasperating human beings for whom they would unequivocally die.

Children have long played a symbolic role in a debate that was carried out far over their actual heads. For everyone who saw them as the ultimate affirmation of life itself, someone else saw our treatment of them as reason to despair. The poet Philip Larkin wrote, “Man hands on misery to man. / It deepens like a coastal shelf. / Get out as early as you can, / And don’t have any kids yourself.” It didn’t much matter. Most people went ahead and had them anyway.

It seems as if we might now be transforming an old and insoluble philosophical conflict into an empirical experiment with real stakes. Sometimes it seems as though we’re in a hurry to do so. The fertility-rate culture war wields children as symbolic extensions of ourselves. People look to the birth rate as an index of what is normal, and no one is safe from the dread of judgment. Conservatives with large families fear they are seen as zoo animals. Liberals without children fear they are seen as selfish careerists or libertines. This may not just be a consequence of the fertility decline; it might be intensifying it. Children could survive being yoked to the value of humanity as a whole. It feels much more perilous to treat them as instruments of our own identities.

Children are variables in our lives. But they are also strange birds of their own. Religious people talk about them as carriers of the divine spark, technologists as messengers from the future. Secular humanists are content to mumble something about the imagination. In any case, they should probably be prevented from sticking their fingers into sockets or setting fire to our homes. But we might otherwise trust them to figure out what they mean, or how to mean it. We might stand before them as models of humility and ambivalence. It is not fair for us, as individual parents or as a society, to expect them to bear the weight of our certainties. They are, after all, just children. ♦

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